

Waxman Leads Democrats' Counterattack

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By Faye Fiore

With the House Republican investigation into Democratic campaign finances stumbling badly, congressional Democrats are mobilizing for a counterattack. And they are putting their faith in a 12-term Westside congressman. His feet barely touch the floor when he sits down, but when he walks the halls of Congress he has a reputation as one of the most skilled and stubborn liberals ever to serve in the institution.

Henry Arnold Waxman, the man who gleefully took on the tobacco industry, is now demanding a full investigation of fund-raising by the White House and both parties. It is the system, not his party, that is corrupt, he insists.

Waxman scored a major victory Thursday when the House took a preliminary vote that would kill up to \$20 million that the GOP had sought for its investigation. The fight will resume after a two-week congressional recess. But in the meantime, until he gets the sort of investigation he wants, Waxman is going to make sure some of the mud splatters on the other side.

"His job is to make sure the Republicans shed as much blood as the Democrats," said Larry Sabato, political science professor at the University of Virginia.

In doing that, Waxman has one "enormous advantage," Sabato said. "The public is cynical enough to assume automatically that they all do it."

But there are disadvantages too. The GOP has more than 100 investigators at its disposal. In the office where the Democrats plot their counter-assault, there are phones, but no jacks; there are computers, but they don't work. Half the operation is in a House office basement; the other half is three blocks away in an annex the government would have sold by now, but nobody wants to buy it.

And the staff of 21 is eagerly awaiting delivery of a storage closet where it can put 186 boxes left over from last year's investigation of the White House travel office firings.

But for the last two months, Waxman has used his position as ranking Democrat on the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee to chip away at the GOP.

He has accused its leadership of going after President Clinton "to get even for Watergate." When Vice President Al Gore came under attack, Waxman tipped the press to a donors' reception held at the home of another vice president--Dan Quayle.

And this week he sought to rein in the committee's chairman, Rep. Dan Burton of Indiana, accusing him of running the investigation "like a one-man show."

Burton's own problems have helped Waxman's cause. Burton's dislike for Clinton is palpable--he once demanded an accounting of tax dollars spent answering fan mail for Socks the cat and offered to shoot up a "head-like" object in his backyard to prove that former White House top aide Vincent Foster was murdered.

And this past week, Burton was forced to suspend his committee's hearings after allegations surfaced that he had pressured a lobbyist for Pakistan into making contributions to his campaign.

Waxman was quick to press his point that Burton is proposing an investigation that would be unfair.

"It is unthinkable that we would undertake an investigation, as Chairman Burton would have us, of such limited scope that we only look at campaign finance abuses at the White House, but aren't permitted even to look at abuses by members of Congress. That is clearly a cover-up," Waxman said at a Washington news conference.

"Chairman Burton is turning what could have been a wide-ranging, fair investigation into a partisan investigation only of President Clinton and the Democrats," Waxman said. "It will look like another food fight. . . . It won't have much credibility."

This is something of an odd role for Waxman. He has spent most of his political career advocating causes of the poor, the elderly and the environment. Before Democrats lost control of Congress, he led efforts to impose new controls on tobacco sales and advertising. Moreover, he is a fund-raising legend--pioneering a donor network that helped elect like-minded liberals to Congress and greatly expanded his power on the Hill.

He and a fellow Democrat, Rep. Howard Berman of Panorama City, raised scads of money from wealthy Southern Californians in the 1980s and shared it generously with other liberal candidates.

He helped pioneer the tactic of throwing campaign dollars to House colleagues in 1978, contributing heavily to members of a key health subcommittee he wanted to chair. He won the spot in a stunning upset. Critics called the strategy brazen vote-buying. It was all perfectly legal.

But a few years ago, Waxman soured on the money chase. A 1996 fund-raiser was his first in five years. Surpluses and unsolicited donations were enough to carry his campaigns until then, with a district so safe that the last time around, he didn't even bother to put up campaign signs.

Then the Democrats lost the House after 40 years of control, and Waxman picked up the phone again, this time asking donors for sums he once considered unthinkable. "I was making calls for 5, 10, 25, 50, 100,000 dollars," he said.

When a colleague's resignation raised him to the position of ranking Democrat on the government reform committee, Waxman said, he seized the chance to change a system he considers corrupting, even while he keeps working in it.

"I want to reform the campaign finance system, but until we do reform it, I've got to live within it," he said. "I want the Democrats to win back the House, and I know we have to raise the money to pay for those elections."

Such a view probably puts him in a glass house, but in there with him are most of Congress and the White House.

Republicans insist that it is the Democrats who have corrupted the system, dismissing Waxman's efforts as "a nice try."

"He has a party responsibility to bash Republicans and he's the best of the bulldogs and he's the one to do it," said Rep. David Dreier (R-San Dimas). "But he's grasping at straws."

But Democrats, tired of getting pummeled, are happy to have a bulldog in their corner.

"He is tough, he's focused. He is not somebody who wants to facilitate every conversation," said Rep. Vic Fazio (D-West Sacramento). "He wants to win."

Waxman says his cause is not party politics but campaign reform. Political observers are unconvinced his motives are pure.

"I would guess Henry Waxman fervently believes this is about campaign reform," said Washington political consultant Stuart Rothenberg. "But to say this is not also a way to deal with all the media focus on Al Gore, the president or the party would be naive. And if there is one thing Henry Waxman isn't, it's naive."